

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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THERE were about thirty or forty of them outside under the dim street lights. They were leaning against things—against their beat-up cars, against dark store fronts, against the elm trees—and they were looking this way and talking.

But that's all they were doing now.

I moved away from the window.

Jed Tracy was cleaning one of the rifles from the rack. They were all whistle-clean, but it was something for him to do. "It's been about ten years since this town's had a lynching," he said.

I took a seat at my desk and lit a cigarette.

There were a couple of shouts outside, but they didn't mean anything. They weren't pointed this way.

Jed listened, too, and then fitted a rifle patch into the rod slot. "You worried, Sheriff?"

"No."

"Why not? There's plenty of men out there."

I shrugged. "A good dog fight could draw them away. They don't need a lynching for entertainment.

They'll drink a little more and maybe they'll whip themselves up to knocking at the door. But that's it. From then on they back down." I watched Jed. "Suppose they try to get Randall? What are you going to do? Invite them in?"

He inspected the bore against the light. "I got a deputy's badge and I got a duty. You don't have to worry about me."

My phone rang and I picked it up. It was long distance from the State capitol.

"Sheriff Bragan?"

"That's right."

"This is Governor Hassett. I understand that you might be having some trouble up there?"

"No trouble."

There were a few seconds of silence. "I had a phone call from a woman in your town. Teaches school there. She said that it looked as though there might be a . . ."

He was reluctant to use the word.

"A lynching."

"There won't be."

"Well . . . she said that people are congregating all around the jail."

Of an evening, individuals should stay at home and partake of a good mystery. Living vicariously via the printed word, you will find, is considerably less trouble. So the next time you've been invited to participate in a mob, do consider my recommendation.

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STREET

LIGHTS

by Jack Ritchie

"A few of them. But nothing I can't take care of."

He was probably rubbing his chin. "Suppose I send a half a dozen State troopers up there? Just to make sure?"

"I can handle everything up here.

We don't take too kindly to outside interference."

The governor understood that. We were hill people, a little queer and poor, but we voted.

"Just what kind of a—ah—crime was committed?"

UNDER DIM STREET LIGHTS

"A man got drunk in a bar and killed another man."

The governor was relieved. "Good." He quickly corrected himself. "I mean, I'm rather glad—for the State—that it isn't one of those—well, you know—some types of crimes get people more excited than others."

"It wasn't."

"Now you're positive you won't need any help? We don't want any more bad publicity for our State, you know."

"I won't need any help."

"Good. But be sure to call if things look at all bad."

"I will." I waited until he hung up and then put down the phone. "That was the governor."

Jed slipped the bolt back into the rifle. "So you can handle everything?"

I studied him. "You don't like being just the deputy, do you? You figure you should be wearing my badge?"

He looked up. "I was the deputy when Parks retired. The town didn't have to pass me over. So I take a drink now and then. Who doesn't? And if *you* don't like it, why don't you fire me?"

"I like somebody intelligent to talk to."

He glared. "I was born in the hills, but that don't mean I got no brains."

"It doesn't?"

"I was a lieutenant in the Korean War," he snapped. "A field promotion. I didn't have to have no education. And before that I was a sergeant."

"I'm sure your mother was proud of you."

His face was almost purple now. "I was a leader. My men would have followed me to hell."

"Just to see that you really got there?"

The rifle rod bent in his hands. "You think you're so much better than the rest of us because you left a few years and went to college. Why did you come back anyway? Because you sometimes get invited to the big house on the hill?"

Yes, that was why I had come back. Because of the big house on the hill and Helen Randall who lived there. She had been a freshman and I had been a senior and there is a democracy on the college campus that cuts across economic lines. And I knew she had wanted me to come back.

Now her brother Philip called from his cell for another cup of water.

I filled a tin cup and brought it to him.

Randall didn't look too improved after three hours in a cell. The bruises on his face were dark now and he still hadn't bothered

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to brush the dirt from his tuxedo.

He gulped the water. "When do I get out of this hole, Bragan?"

"This isn't a traffic offense."

He laughed shortly. "You're talking to Philip Randall, Bragan. I own this town."

"You own the mines."

"Same thing. Have you heard from Carson?"

"No."

Carson was his lawyer and he was out trying to do his best for Randall.

Randall pulled a digarette out of a crumpled pack. "I don't remember a thing."

"There were fourteen people in that bar who will do plenty remembering."

He shrugged that off.

I knew what he was thinking. His money could buy their memories, if it was necessary. He didn't have to worry.

He dragged the cigarette to life. "Who am I supposed to have killed?"

"One of your miners. Bill Waker."

The name didn't mean a thing to him.

He heard the shouting outside and went to the barred window. "What the devil do they want?"

"You."

He watched them for awhile and maybe he was worried.

"Just what made you go into

that particular barroom anyway?" I asked. "Slumming?"

"It's a free country."

"Sure. But you were drunk and wearing a tuxedo and that was a red flag to everybody in there. It sort of reminded them that there are kings and there are peasants. And it especially bothered Bill Waker. One word led to another and you didn't have sense enough to leave. Or the gun you carried made you brave."

He scowled. "It was self-defense. He started the fight. Everybody who was there knows that."

"Maybe. But half the people around here are Wakers or related to them. They won't want to look at it that way." I smiled faintly. "And I'm glad to see your memory isn't as bad as you thought it was."

I went back into the office.

Jed was at the window. "They got themselves a few more jugs."

I took a look. There were close to fifty of them now and maybe they were trying to work up their courage, but I still thought they'd get just plain drunk first and look for a place to sleep. I recognized a couple of Jed's cousins sitting in a Model A.

The powerful beams of car headlights brightened the street and a horn blew. The mob blinked and gave ground grudgingly to let the convertible through.

It stopped in front of the jail. The crowd closed in slightly—curious, awed, and maybe resentful of the car and the woman who drove it.

Helen Randall got out and came up the steps. I unlocked the door.

Helen had clear blue eyes and she looked at me. "Lew, where is my brother?"

"We've got only two cells," Jed said. "I'm sure he's in one of them."

I took her to the small cell block and Jed followed.

Randall came to the bars. "Well, well, my dear little sister. It's so nice of you to drop everything and rush right over."

She flushed faintly. "I came as soon as I learned you were in trouble. I was at the Jacksons. You know that's over sixty miles from here."

He showed white teeth. "As long as you're finally here, dear Helen. We Randalls must rally around the flag, even if there are just two of us."

"Just what happened, Philip? Carson didn't explain too clearly."

Randall rubbed the back of his neck. "They tell me I killed somebody. Walker—Welker—Wilker. Something like that."

"Bill Waker," Jed said evenly. "He left a wife and six kids."

"Is that right?" Randall said dis-

interestedly. "These hill people have such large families."

Jed turned on his heel and left.

Helen touched my arm. "I'd like to talk to Philip alone, please."

In the office I found Jed working angrily on another clean rifle.

Helen joined us after ten minutes. "Can't you do anything about those people out there, Lew? They're making Philip—well—nervous."

"He's perfectly safe here, Helen."

She didn't seem too sure of that. "Don't you think that it might be better if you took Philip to Marysville?"

I shook my head. "No, Helen. I don't think we ought to move him out of the county."

She had to accept that. "You won't let anything happen to him?" she asked.

"Of course not."

She went to the door. "I'll see if I can get in touch with Carson and find out what he's been doing for Philip."

"Just a minute," I said. I took a rifle from the rack and unlocked the door. The crowd watched me and the noise died.

"Move away from the lady's car," I ordered.

Helen frowned slightly. "You didn't have to do that, Lew. I'm sure they wouldn't have done anything."

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er's chest. He was the dead Bill Waker's uncle. "You heard me, Elmo. Are you going to move or would you rather have other people carry you away?"

He glared at me and backed away from the car. The rest of them sullenly followed his example.

I watched Helen drive away and then raised my voice. "All of you get back to your homes and sober up. Or if you aren't ready for that, at least get off the streets."

There were hoots as I stepped back inside the building.

Jed had his chair tipped against a wall and stared thoughtfully at his fingernails. "Do you think the State will get around to hanging Randall?"

I said nothing.

Jed looked up. "We got the names of fourteen witnesses. They got good eyesight."

"And poor pockets."

Jed became thoughtful. And I imagined his thoughts were on what would probably happen. Randall would put a little money into circulation and just about everybody would either forget what happened or claim that he saw something else when it came time to tell about it in court.

He glowered. "Some of the witnesses were Waker kin. They can't be bought."

"I wouldn't bet on that. There's nothing thinner than blood when money is around."

He rubbed the knuckles of one hand. "It isn't right. Who does he think we are anyway?"

"I wouldn't know."

A pane of glass in the front window suddenly shattered and a stone skidded across the floor.

Jed swore and got quickly to his feet.

I went to the window. The mob had swelled and now there was even a scattering of eager-eyed women. But that stone was the only one that came our way. For now, at least.

I went back to my desk and glanced at the list of witnesses who had been in the bar. Eleven men and three women. One of them was Donna Mae Davis.

"Donna Mae," I said thoughtfully.

Jed stiffened. "What about her?"

"Who was she with?"

Jed didn't say anything.

Donna Mae was about nineteen and I'd seen her with Jed a number of times. But not lately.

"Did Randall bring her? Or was she there waiting for him?"

"I didn't ask," Jed snapped.

I put down the list and yawned. "Well, maybe he was going to marry her."

But that was something nobody

in town believed—unless it was Donna Mae.

Randall called and we went to his cell.

His face was pale. "They're getting worse out there. Can't you hear them? They're out for blood." His hands gripped the bars. "Look, Bragan. Take me to Marysville. I'll make it worth your while. A thousand bucks."

"I'll think it over," I said.

Back in the office, Jed was thinking and I knew it was about a thousand dollars.

I went to the wall cabinet and opened it.

Jed frowned. "What are you doing?"

I hefted one of the tear gas grenades. "I'm going to make a little open space out there. It's getting too crowded."

Jed's mouth dropped. "You can't do that!"

"Why not?"

"Women are out there, too."

"They've got no business here. This isn't a family picnic. Or do they want to help pull the rope?"

I went to the door and flung it open. I pulled the pin and tossed the grenade into the center of the crowd. I stepped back inside and locked the door.

It took a couple of seconds before they felt what I'd done and then there were curses and shouts

and the frightened angry screaming of the women.

Jed glared. "You could at least have given them a warning."

"They understand this a lot better."

"They'll be back. This time without the women."

"I've got more grenades."

Jed was silent for a while and then he said, "Suppose we take Randall to Marysville. How would we split the thousand he promised?"

"We don't take his money. We get our salaries."

He laughed harshly. "You'll take the money. You're not that straight. Your palm's just as sticky as anybody's."

I let the big wall clock tick for fifteen seconds and then I smiled slowly. "You're fired."

He stared at me.

"You're fired," I said again.

Color rushed into his face. "What the hell! You wouldn't fire me at a time like this. Not because of what I just said. You're going to take Randall to Marysville all by yourself and pocket the money."

"Leave the badge here," I said evenly.

He moved toward me, his big hands working.

I slipped the .38 from my holster. "If you're not listening, maybe you can understand this."

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His eyes blazed, but he stopped. He slowly unpinned the badge from his shirt and flipped it into the wastebasket.

When he was gone, I re-locked the door.

Randall called again after half an hour.

His face was puzzled. "Everybody's gone. The streets are deserted."

"It's late. They got drunk and sleepy."

Randall was still uneasy. "I don't know. I think you ought to take me to Marysville. I'll make it two thousand."

"You're safe here."

I went back to the office. I leaned back in my chair and put my legs on the desk. I yawned.

The click of the lock woke me.

There must have been about a dozen of them and they poured through the door like a river. My hand went toward my holster, but a half dozen shotguns pointed at my chest told me to stop that.

They were all masked—some with black dominoes, some with handkerchiefs pulled to their eyes, and two had nylon stockings over their heads.

I raised my hands. "You're making the mistake of your lives. You'll regret this as long as you live."

None of them said a word, but

their leader, a big man with a .45 caliber army automatic, took the ring of keys from the peg and indicated in the direction of the cells.

I moved ahead of him. "Don't be fools," I said. Half of the State will be down on your necks."

Randall's face turned sheet-white when he saw us. "Bragan!" he shrieked. "You can't let them do this!"

There were a dozen keys on the ring, but the big man found the right one without taking an inventory. He opened Randall's cell and four or five of them went inside for him. And they needed that many. Randall screamed and kicked and bit while they dragged him out.

The big man shoved me into the empty cell and slammed the door.

I watched him lock up. His hands were gloved and so he wasn't going to leave any fingerprints. I noticed that there were two slight cut marks in the leather of his right shoe.

One of the men remained behind for a moment. He was thin and I thought I could see a grim smile behind the nylon stocking. He pulled the pin out of a tear gas grenade and lay it on the floor outside of my cell where it would be just inches out of my reach.

"Eat that, Bragan," he snapped, and ran out of the front door.

I whipped off my belt, made a loop at the last hole, and flipped it over the grenade and pulled it toward me. I picked it up, darted to the window, and gave it a flip as far outside and downwind as I could. Not much of the tear gas was in the cell, but there was enough to keep me at the window.

I could still hear Randall screaming hysterically, but from the window I couldn't see the masked men or what they were doing.

I shouted and that brought me nobody. But I was certain that a lot of people were watching from the corner of their shades.

And then Randall stopped screaming.

There was silence for ten minutes and then I heard the sounds of cars starting and driving away.

The silence returned.

I shouted again and again and got nothing but the echo of my voice.

After awhile I gave it up and there was nothing to do but wait.

The air in my cell had cleared and I smoked a half a dozen cigarettes before I heard the footsteps in the office.

It was Jed Tracy. He almost smiled. "I thought you could handle everything?"

I rose from the bunk. "Get the key."

He took his time about it.

I stepped out of the cell. "Where were you?"

"I was fired and home sleeping."

I looked down at the two cut marks on the toe of his right shoe. "You're sure about that?"

He grinned faintly. "I'm sure and so are all my kin."

"They watched you sleep?"

"Why not?"

"What woke you?"

"Ted Purley phoned my place and told me what happened. So I thought I'd wander back here to see if there was anything I could do—as a private citizen." His next words were cautious. "Did you recognize any of them?"

"Would it do any good?"

He rubbed his chin as though he were considering it objectively. "Might not. People have a way of sticking together around here. It would be hard to pin the lynching on anybody."

They had left my gun on the desk and I put it back in my holster. "I had the door locked, but they got in. Now I wonder how they got a key."

Jed's eyes flickered. "It's an old lock. Half the keys in town could open that door."

"Where's Randall?"

"Not far. Just down the street a way."

I went to the door and stepped out on the landing.

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Randall was hanging from the oak in front of the general store.

I went back inside and phoned the State troopers. Then I picked my hat off the floor. "Let's get a ladder and cut him down."

The first troopers arrived in twenty minutes, and more came later. A lot more.

There were questions for me to answer, but what I had to say didn't help anybody much. I didn't mention the scratches on Jed's shoes. They weren't enough to get him into any court and I still wanted to live in this town awhile.

The sun was newly up when I drove to the big house on the hill to tell Helen Randall what had happened, but she already knew.

The mist of tears was in her eyes and she came into my arms—because now she was alone, because now she knew me better than anyone now alive, because we had been very close in college.

I patted her shoulder. "I'm sorry, Helen."

"Don't blame yourself, Lew. I know you did everything you could."

Yes. I had done everything I could.

I had done everything I could to see that Randall died.

The mob had been there, but I was certain it hadn't been ready to do anything more than use its lungs and throw a few stones. I had to work it up. I had to make it white angry. And the tear gas had helped.

But still I wasn't sure that it would move unless it had somebody to lead it—somebody who was eaten by the bitterness of bought justice, somebody who brooded about Donna Mae, somebody who thought I wasn't going to share a thousand dollars for taking Randall to Marysville.

I had worked on these things and I had worked on Jed, and when he was ready, I had given the mob its leader.

Now I looked past Helen at the hills. They and the coal in them had been Philip Randall's, and now they belonged to Helen.

She held me tight and I smiled.

It wouldn't be long before they belonged to me.

